1.   (currently amended) A method for charging a payment transaction to a customer, said method comprising the steps of:

(a)   offering an incentive to identify a plurality of payment instruments usable to consummate said transaction;

(b)   obtaining from said customer information describing at least two payment instruments from said plurality of payment instruments identified by said customer, wherein:

(i)   said customer is willing to allow said payment transaction to be processed using any of said described payment instruments,

(ii)   said described payment instruments utilize different funding sources, and

(iii)   each of said described payment instruments is usable for processing said payment transaction in its entirety;

(c)   submitting information regarding said described payment instruments to a computer-implemented transaction evaluator configured to automatically select one of said described payment instruments based on relative economic utility of said described payment instruments;

(d)   receiving from said transaction evaluator the transaction evaluator's selection of one of said described payment instruments;

(e)   notifying said customer which of said payment instruments was selected; and

(f)   receiving funds for the payment of said transaction using said selected payment instrument.

2.   (original) The method of claim 1 where, in said step (c), said relative economic utility is that to a merchant performing at least said step (a).

3. (original) The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step prior to at least said step (f) of electronically transmitting to a payment network data identifying at least said selected payment instrument and the amount of said transaction.

4. (original) The method of claim 3 comprising the additional step after at least said step (d) of receiving confirmation from said payment network that said payment transaction was processed successfully.

5. (previously presented) The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of obtaining from said customer explicit authorization to process said payment transaction using said selected payment instrument.

6. (original) The method of claim 5 where said explicit authorization includes a signature.

7. (original) The method of claim 1 where said steps (a), (b), and (e) are performed via electronic communication with said customer.

8. (original) The method of claim 7 where said electronic communication includes using an automated telephony-based response system.

9. (original) The method of claim 7 where at least said step (a) includes sending a form over the Internet to a web browser operated by said customer.

10. (previously presented) The method of claim 1 further comprising the additional step after said step (c) of said transaction evaluator comparing estimated transaction benefit values associated with each of said described payment instruments and selecting the one of said payment instruments with the greatest transaction benefit.

11. (previously presented) The method of claim 1 comprising the further steps after at least said step (b) of:

   (i) transmitting information about said payment transaction to a computer authorized to represent the issuer of at least one of said described payment instruments, and

(ii) receiving in response from said computer a first offer describing the terms under which said issuer is willing to process said payment transaction.

12. (original) The method of claim 11 where said offer must meet a predefined minimum amount for said issuer to be granted priority in receiving said payment transaction.

13. (previously presented) The method of claim 11 comprising the further steps of:

(i) receiving from the issuer of a second of said described payment instruments a second offer;

(ii) identifying which of said first offer and said second offer provides a greater transaction benefit; and

(iii) accepting the more favorable of said offers.

14. (original) The method of claim 13 comprising the further step of computing the terms for said payment transaction as a function of both said first offer and said second offer.

15. (previously presented) The method of claim 1 wherein the selection of step (d) comprises:

(i) conducting an automatic electronic auction among issuers of said described payment instruments;

(ii) identifying a winner of said auction; and

(iii) selecting the one of said described payment instruments issued by said winner.

16. (previously presented) The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step of updating records containing payment instrument selection criteria utilized by said transaction evaluator.

17. (original) The method of claim 16 where said records include a list of payment processing terms for payment instruments from preferred issuers.

18.   (original) The method of claim 16 where said records include:

    (i)   routing tables containing communications network information corresponding to a plurality of payment instrument issuers; and

    (ii)   software for analyzing responses received from said plurality of issuers.

19.   (previously presented) The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step after at least said step (c) of receiving from an issuer of at least one of said described payment instruments an incentive based on which of said described payment instruments is selected.

20.   (original) The method of claim 19 where said incentive includes a payment guarantee to accept risk associated with said transaction.

21.   (original) The method of claim 19 where said incentive includes a payment for processing said transaction using a payment instrument from an issuer other than the issuer providing said incentive.

22.   (previously presented) The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step after said step (c) of analyzing and comparing the risk associated with at least two of said described payment instruments, as part of assessing said relative economic utility of said described payment instruments.

23.   (previously presented) The method of claim 22 including using information from at least one of said described payment instruments to estimate risk associated with another of said described payment instruments.

24.   (canceled)

25.   (canceled)

26.   (original) The method of claim 1 where said step (f) is performed before said step (e).

27.   (previously presented) The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step after at least said step (b) of obtaining transaction authorizations for the amount of said payment transaction from issuers of each of said described payment instruments.

28.   (original) The method of claim 1 where said transaction evaluator is operated by a merchant performing at least said step (a).

29.   (original) The method of claim 1 where said transaction evaluator is located in a server connected to the Internet.

30.   (original) The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step prior to said step (a) of.

- receiving an order from said customer;

- based on said order, determining that it is advantageous to request multiple payment instruments from said customer;

and comprising the additional steps after said step (f) of

- receiving a second order from a second customer;

- based on said second order, determining that it is not advantageous to request multiple payment instruments from said second customer;

- soliciting from said second customer a single payment instrument; and

- receiving from said second customer information describing a single payment instrument.

31.   (original) The method of claim 1 performed using a computer staffed by an operator communicating via telephone with said customer who is placing an order.

32.   (original) The method of claim 1 where said solicited payment instruments are of different types.

33.   (previously presented) The method of claim 1 where said described payment instruments are credit cards from different issuers.

34.   (original) The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step of updating records in a computer-based accounting system to reflect an amount due from the issuer of said selected payment instrument.

35.   (currently amended) Apparatus for charging a payment transaction to a customer, said apparatus comprising:

(a)   means for offering an incentive to identify a plurality of payment instruments usable to consummate said transaction;

(b)   means for obtaining from the customer information describing at least two payment instruments <u>from said plurality of payment instruments identified by said customer</u>, wherein:

(i)   said customer is willing to allow said payment transaction to be processed using any of said described payment instruments,

(ii)   said described payment instruments utilize different funding sources, and

(iii)   each of said described payment instruments is usable for processing said payment transaction in its entirety;

(c)   means for submitting information regarding said described payment instruments to a computer-implemented transaction evaluator configured to automatically select one of said described payment instruments based on relative economic utility of said described payment instruments to an entity from the group of entities consisting of a merchant interfacing with the customer and an issuer of a described payment instrument;

(d)   means for receiving from said transaction evaluator the transaction evaluator's selection of one of said described payment instruments; and

(e) means for outputting which of said payment instruments was selected.

36. (original) The apparatus of claim 35 where said elements (a), (b), and (e) are configured for electronic communication with said customer using an automated telephony-based response system.

37. (original) The apparatus of claim 36 further comprising means for connecting to the Internet.

38. (previously presented) The apparatus of claim 35 wherein said transaction evaluator is configured to compare estimated transaction benefit values associated with each of said described payment instruments and select the one of said payment instruments with the greatest transaction benefit.

39. (previously presented) The apparatus of claim 35 further comprising:

(i) means for transmitting information about said payment transaction to a computer authorized to represent the issuer of at least one of said described payment instruments, and

(ii) means for receiving in response from said computer a first offer describing the terms under which said issuer is willing to process said payment transaction.

40. (previously presented) The apparatus of claim 39 further comprising:

(i) means for receiving from the issuer of a second of said described payment instruments a second offer;

(ii) means for identifying which of said first offer and said second offer provides a greater transaction benefit; and

(iii) means for accepting the more favorable of said offers.

41. (previously presented) The apparatus of claim 35 wherein the transaction evaluator comprises:

(i)   means for conducting an automatic electronic auction among the issuers of said described payment instruments;

(ii)   means for identifying a winner of said auction; and

(iii)   means for selecting the one of said described payment instruments issued by said winner.

42.   (original) The apparatus of claim 35 further comprising a memory containing:

(i)   payment instrument selection criteria;

(ii)   payment processing terms for payment instruments from preferred issuers;

(iii)   communications network information corresponding to a plurality of payment instrument issuers; and

(iv)   software for analyzing responses received from said plurality of issuers.

43.   (previously presented) The apparatus of claim 35 further comprising means for receiving from an issuer of at least one of said described payment instruments an incentive based on which of said described payment instruments is selected.

44.   (previously presented) The apparatus of claim 35 further comprising means for analyzing and comparing the risk associated with at least two of said described payment instruments, and for using information from at least one of said described payment instruments to estimate risk associated with another of said described payment instruments.

45.   (canceled)

46.   (original) The apparatus of claim 35 further comprising means for:

•   receiving an order from said customer;

- based on said order, determining that it is advantageous to request multiple payment instruments from said customer in said element (a); and means for:

- receiving a second order from a second customer;

- based on said second order, determining that it is not advantageous to request multiple payment instruments from said second customer;

- soliciting from said second customer a single payment instrument; and

- receiving from said second customer information describing a single payment instrument.

47.   (original) The apparatus of claim 35 implemented as a computer staffed by an operator communicating via telephone with said customer who is placing an order.

48.   (original) The apparatus of claim 35 wherein said solicited payment instruments are of different types.

49.   (original) The apparatus of claim 35 further comprising a computer-based accounting system having records updateable to reflect an amount due from the issuer of said selected payment instrument.